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# At the intersections of multiple marginalisations: displacements and environmental justice in Mexico and Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of institutional governance of displacements and the intersecting experiences of environmental justice, drawing on case studies of flood disasters and urban displacements in Villahermosa, Mexico, and government-sponsored displacements and resettlements in rural Oromia, Ethiopia. We argue that a fuller understanding of how institutional governance produces multiple marginalisations requires political–ecological and intersectional analyses of residents’ experiences of injustices that encompass interlinkages between social position, gender and political power. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mexico and Ethiopia, comprising interviews, participant observation, document analysis and surveys. The study shows similarities and differences in patterns of governance, mechanisms of marginalisation and relations of authority and power concerning differentiated displacements and everyday vulnerabilities in different contexts of the global South. Our analysis enriches theoretical understanding of governance and justice, demonstrating how multiple marginalities are produced, reinforced and contested through political processes imbricated with forms of governance characterised by institutional intrusion and absence.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, massive displacements have occurred in many parts of the global South in the name of environmental risk management and the reduction of vulnerability. In urban areas, efforts to relocate informal settlements from strategic locations connect with city beautification and real estate development projects (Bakker 2010; Ghertner 2011; Janoschka and Sequera 2016; Marcuse et al. 2009), while rural smallholders’ displacements link with nature conservation programmes, land investment projects and resource extraction agendas (Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013; Lunstrum 2016; Rocheleau 2015). Many of these operations raise multifaceted questions of environmental justice.

This article examines the politics of institutional governance surrounding massive displacements, and related concerns of environmental justice, drawing on case studies of flood disasters and displacements in the city of Villahermosa, south-eastern Mexico, and government-sponsored displacements and resettlements in rural communities in western Oromia, Ethiopia. We focus on institutional forms of governance, mechanisms of marginalisation and people’s experiences of coping with large-scale displacements and cognate vulnerabilities by analysing intersections between social position, gender and political power, and their differentiated effects on the displaced.

Natural phenomena, such as floods and droughts, are often used to justify the eviction of certain

populations from places considered high-risk areas (Murray 2009; Zeiderman 2012). However, people’s differentiated exposure to environmental risks is closely linked to their everyday vulnerability and the politics of marginalisation, and thus environmental and political causes for displacement are tightly entwined (Bakker 2005; Ghertner 2011; Wisner et al. 2003, 13–17). As we will show, institutional politics shape the causes and consequences of displacement and the associated experiences of injustice in multifaceted ways. On the one hand, governmental authorities carry out forceful relocations and exert strict control over displaced residents’ lives and livelihoods; on the other, they are absent through their inability or unwillingness to provide access to resources and services in resettlement sites (Amoako 2016; Nygren 2016).<sup>1</sup> This conjuncture of institutional presence and absence situates the displaced at the intersections of multiple marginalisations, thereby reinforcing their experiences of injustice.

The goal of expanding state power over particular places and particular people within segregated cities and ‘undeveloped’ rural areas lies behind the massive displacements both in Mexico and Ethiopia. Furthermore, we argue that rather than generating uniform dispossession, institutional politics of displacements entail *socially differentiated* marginalisations by reinforcing existing class, gender and livelihood inequalities and constraining people’s capacity for

political engagement. Although millions of people in Latin America, Asia and Africa have been displaced in recent years, relatively scant attention has been paid to linkages between institutional governance, the production of marginality and experiences of (in)justice connected with displacements (Amoako 2016; Doshi 2013; Weber and Peek 2012). Our study redresses this lacuna by exploring the role of institutional politics in the formation of multiple marginalities and intersecting injustices, and respective experiences of these among the displaced, using Villahermosa and Oromia as cases. While most environmental justice studies have focused solely on the displaced, our analysis explores interactions between institutional politics of displacements and intersecting experiences among the displaced.

Environmental justice as a concept emerged in the United States in the 1980s, when African American, Native American and Latino communities affected by industrial pollution began to protest against environmental racism (Bullard 1983). Many justice scholars make particular reference to the civil rights activists of North Carolina, who mobilised to stop the dumping of soil contaminated with hazardous materials in areas with a high proportion of African Americans, suggesting that this campaign prompted the adoption of justice approaches to environmental concerns (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009). There is, however, a long history of environmental justice claims throughout the world, although many have not been recognised in these terms by 'Western' observers, especially those in the global South where environmental justice is often one among numerous concerns, including livelihood security, human rights, gender and development, rights to the city and claims for equal citizenship (Carruthers 2008; Nygren 2014). Although environmental justice research has recently expanded its spatial scope, most studies still focus on the global North. In our view, justice research would benefit from more diverse foci, incorporating Southern concerns and, thereby, diminishing its dependence on Northern frames of reference and enhancing its analytical approaches with Southern perspectives.

We also propose that careful integration of political-ecological and intersectional perspectives would provide a more holistic approach to environmental justice, increasing its capacity for detailed analysis of everyday politics within wider patterns of governance and justice. Intersectional studies, stemming from black feminism, have long explored how women of colour are subjected to multiple subordinations related to race and gender (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hancock 2007). Recently, intersectionality-oriented scholars have emphasised that multiple mechanisms of marginalisation, working simultaneously, affect people

differently, depending on an array of social axes of difference, including race, gender, class, age and ethnicity (Collins 2015; Collins and Bilge 2016; Das 2011; Sultana 2015; Weber 2011). Correspondingly, political-ecological studies, stemming from anthropology and critical geography, and focusing especially on environmental-developmental inequalities in the global South (Paulson, Gezon, and Watts 2003; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003), have demonstrated that resource access and control is often dominated by a narrow segment of society and that certain social groups' exposure to environmental hazards and disasters is connected to everyday politics of vulnerabilisation (Bakker 2005; Mollett and Faria 2013; Ranganathan and Balazs 2015; Taylor 2015). By integrating political-ecological and intersectional approaches, we seek to elaborate on analytical strategies in order to produce a better understanding of the interconnections between institutional governance, the politics of marginalisation and socially differentiated experiences of injustice surrounding state-induced displacements.

The following section presents a theoretical approach to environmental justice that incorporates political ecology and intersectionality; this is followed by discussion of the contexts and methods of the case studies upon which this analysis is based. The fourth section examines how institutional governance of displacements produces multiple marginalisations, leading to analysis of experiences of injustices among the displaced resulting from the state's political practices of control and neglect, and their intersections with the loci of social position, gender and political power. The final section offers conclusions on displacement and justice in situations where people's experience of governance is a mixture of institutional intrusion and absence.

## 2. New approaches to environmental justice: integrating political ecology and intersectionality

Most of the conventional research on environmental justice has focused on the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among human populations (Bullard 2000). However, along with efforts to determine whether the poor or the hazards arrived first in a particular area, such analyses of distributive justice have focused narrowly on siting, paying scant attention to how access to environmental goods and exposure to environmental bads link with an array of social factors, including race, gender, class and political power (Holifield 2015; Ryder 2017). In our analysis, we pay rigorous attention to the differentiated effects of displacement that lie at the core of multiple injustices.

Recently, scholars employing intersectional approaches have emphasised that injustice should not be viewed merely as an issue of distribution but, rather, as a process related to governance that generates unequal distributions (Das 2011; Krause and Schramm 2011). On this basis, the field of justice has broadened to include dimensions of institutional recognition and politics of differentiation, where socially differentiated distribution of environmental benefits and burdens is linked to institutional frames of (mis)recognition and the authorities' categorisation of certain social groups as intrusive others (Ghertner 2011). Furthermore, by highlighting differentiated opportunities to take part in decision-making, intersectional studies have emphasised justice as an issue of political representation (Fraser 2009; Nightingale 2011; Sultana 2015). These formulations have facilitated exploring justice in more nuanced ways, incorporating aspects of redistribution, recognition and representation (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010; Walker 2009, 2012; Wayessa and Nygren 2016).

Our analysis focuses on the role of the state in the operations of displacement, and on displaced residents' experiences of institutional forms of governance and intersecting marginalisations. Complex relationships between governance, displacement and justice emerge when institutional politics seeks to enforce what is considered economically profitable and socially prestigious in strategic areas, while relocating impoverished people, categorised as socially and politically disturbing others, to the edges of the state. Based on their views of the poor as surplus population, the authorities frequently portray informal settlements as hazardous and disordered, and thus targets of forced evictions (Doshi 2013; Ghertner 2011).

We examine the politics of displacements and the intersecting marginalisations in Villahermosa and Oromia from two perspectives which are crucial for understanding governance and justice: first, the state institutions' active presence in marginalised people's lives and livelihoods in the form of forced evictions and strict regulations; second, the state's institutional absence through lack of planning and the refusal to provide basic infrastructure and services in resettlement sites. By ignoring the needs and aspirations of people relocated to areas with poor living conditions and infrastructure, authorities reinforce their vulnerability. This neglect, together with limited livelihood opportunities, deepens the marginality of the displaced, leaving them in the shadows of informality and improvisation, while hiding the state's responsibility in displacement and resettlement.

Recent political-ecological studies have emphasised how massive displacements are frequently linked to accumulation by dispossession, whereby states advance the interests of upper and middle

classes, developers and corporations by removing the poor from places targeted for redevelopment (Bannerjee-Guha 2010; Doshi 2013; Harvey 2008). Our study draws upon political-ecological perspectives to demonstrate that displacements tend to concentrate among under-served populations, while environmental risks and vulnerabilities have socio-spatial expressions related to class, gender and ethnicity (Malin 2015; Sze et al. 2009). Moreover, political ecology's emphasis on justice as a multi-scale process provides fruitful ways to understand the wider political-economical connections of governance and justice (Heynen 2014; Peet, Robbins, and Watts 2011).

Simultaneously, through examination of institutional forms of governance and cognate relations of authority and power, our study adds detailed analyses of the negotiations and trade-offs entailed in such processes to this body of literature. In the course of the discussion, differentiated politics and the politics of differentiation are posited as key dynamics in the governance of displacements and the subjectivity of the displaced. Further, recent political-ecological research on displacements related to city beautification, resource extraction and land investments has enriched our analyses of environmental justice, shifting attention from patterns of inequality to the ways that people translate such patterns into collective grievances and networks of transformation (Bebbington and Bury 2014; Holifield 2012; Nygren 2017; Rocheleau 2015).

Scholars oriented towards intersectional analysis have emphasised that for a better understanding of how environmental inequalities are (re)produced, negotiated and contested, nuanced examination of everyday politics of resource distribution, institutional recognition and political representation is needed, instead of assuming social inequalities and marginalities as given (Das 2011; Fraser 2009; Nightingale 2011; Ryder 2017). Furthermore, according to recent intersectional approaches, shifting social relations and subject formations are central to understanding struggles for justice. These processes are especially relevant when exploring the political subjectivity of people experiencing multiple marginalisations. Rather than proposing a coherent subaltern subjectivity, therefore, our study explores how intersections between social position, gender and political power shape people's opportunities to cope with and contest institutional procedures of control and structural mechanisms of neglect through everyday forms of resistance, symbolic reinterpretation and social mobilisation (Anand 2011; Hankins 2017; Nielsen 2011; Roy 2011; Sletto and Nygren 2015).

Overall, we propose new avenues for a careful linking of a political-ecological analysis with the intersectional approach to environmental justice especially in the following domains:

- (1) According to intersectional theorists, *more than one category of difference* plays a role in governance and justice, and their material and discursive underpinnings. For this reason, recognition of multiple axes of difference, such as class, gender and political power, are necessary to understand how politics of marginalisation are forged and contested in particular circumstances (Hawkins et al. 2011; Krause and Schramm 2011; Sultana 2015; Weber 2011). Given that displacements often generate debate about the legitimacy of the causes of relocation, it is crucial to understand how the linkages between different forms of marginalisation are socially produced and politically charged.
- (2) Although diverse actors and institutions are often involved in displacement operations, by regulating access to resources and services, *the state has a central role* in the politics of displacements. In both cases analysed here, the state has reclaimed crucial resources in displacement sites and plays a critical role in the control of resources and services in resettlement sites. An intersectional approach recognises governance as a processual phenomenon rather than a fixed outcome of planned policy (McGuirk 2013). Furthermore, both intersectional and political-ecological studies carefully consider how different arenas of formal and informal decision-making are constituted and reconstituted in hierarchical negotiations between diverse actors (Lund 2011, 2016).
- (3) Justice is a socio-spatial phenomenon *produced through situated political practices* and experienced differently from various social positions. Thus, notions of justice must be understood within particular circumstances by examining contextualised meanings, while at the same time considering wider connections (Hawkins et al. 2011). Both intersectional and political-ecological approaches emphasise the importance of examining how multi-layered but situational procedures of politics of differentiation produce multiple marginalisations and interrelated inequalities (Sultana 2015; Urkidi and Walter 2011). Negotiations over how environments and populations should be managed, in order to make them more governable, politicise landscapes and livelihoods in multifaceted ways, as actors often advance conflicting interests and contrasting views of rights and responsibilities. This is manifest especially at the margins of the state, where multiple struggles over materiality and meaning overlap in response to shifting forms of governance and justice.

The following analysis of institutional governance, multiple marginalisations and intersecting injustices demonstrates that the state's practices of differentiated displacements relate to the ways certain groups of people are marginalised. By building on scholarship in the fields of political ecology and intersectionality, our study seeks to contribute to an analytical understanding of governance and (in)justice under conditions of intersectional oppression. In our view, this kind of approach can provide analytical insights into how diverse dimensions of justice are interlinked in Southern contexts, crucial for a variety of societally relevant topics, including nature conservation and local livelihoods, disaster management and vulnerability, development and social segregation, and resource grabbing and political dispossession.

### 3. Contexts and methods

Our analysis is based on ethnographic field research undertaken in the city of Villahermosa, the State of Tabasco, south-eastern Mexico and in rural communities of western Oromia, Ethiopia. Both of these areas have recently undergone massive, state-induced displacements. Villahermosa, with one million inhabitants, is inscribed with noticeable social segregation: affluent gated communities set apart from middle-class neighbourhoods and informal settlements. The city is located on wetlands, less than 10 m above sea level, and traversed by two big rivers: the Grijalva and the Carrizal. Serious floods have been recorded in the region since the 1800s; however, exceptional devastation occurred in 2007, when 62% of the city was inundated and damages were calculated at US\$ 3 billion (CEPAL 2008). The disaster was the outcome of combined bio-physical and socio-political factors, including a tropical storm that provoked heavy rainfall, sedimentation of the rivers due to agricultural land use, the inadequate operation of hydroelectric dams and urban policy and planning that ignored the disparities in residents' vulnerability in the face of flooding (Aparicio et al. 2009).

After the 2007 disaster, governmental institutions produced detailed maps of the critical risk zones in Villahermosa (SEDESOL 2009; SOTOP 2015), and thereafter relocated about 30,000 residents from informal settlements along the riverbanks to peri-urban settlements – Gracias México, 27 de Octubre and Bicentenario – 20 km from the centre. Many of the displaced had usufruct rights to land owned by the federal state and most subsisted on informal domestic work, low-paid manual jobs and ambulatory trade. According to archival data, plans to relocate these people had existed since the 1990s; however, political sensitivity had prompted the governmental authorities to postpone these efforts. The 2007 flood provided a pretext to 'clean' the informal settlements in



the name of saving the city from future disaster (Nygren 2016). Interestingly, many affluent neighbourhoods, commercial centres and industrial facilities have also been built in high-risk areas by filling the land and constructing massive flood protection infrastructure. The institutional categorisations of legal settlements and illegal encroachments, and risky and safe living environments, seem to depend on the class of people living in a given area.

Correspondingly, in Oromia, the displacement schemes undertaken by the Ethiopian government (Hammond 2011; Wayessa 2013) have presented rainfall shortage/drought and land shortage and degradation as the main drivers. However, although not made public, the government's plan to establish 'conservation enclosures' was part of the reason for relocations. What the government portrayed as a socially benevolent action addressing local livelihood insecurities became a political issue when people were denied any decisive say in the relocations. Displacements are historically contested issues in Ethiopia, and central to longstanding tensions between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state, formerly ruled by Amhara and currently by Tigray elites. The Oromo's recent social mobilisation and resistance is linked to deep-seated injustices perpetrated by the government against them.

In the latest wave of relocations, taking place since 2003 and the focus of the case discussed here, the government resettled hundreds of thousands of Oromo smallholders to sites which varied considerably in terms of land availability, soil quality, access to water and proximity to host populations. Our study focuses on people relocated from West Hararge and East Hararge of eastern Oromia, and North Shawa of central Oromia to East Wallagga, Qellem Wallagga and Ilu Abbabora of western Oromia. Because both resettlers and hosts in these areas depend on crop production and livestock husbandry for their livelihoods, the resettlement instigated competition over land and other resources and reinforced existing class, gender and power inequalities.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the role of governance in displacement politics, and the affected people's experiences of marginalisation, we utilised multiple methods of data gathering. In Villahermosa, the first author carried out 60 interviews with displaced residents between 2009 and 2016, exploring their experiences of flood disaster and subsequent displacements, and their views of living in resettlement sites and dealing with the vulnerabilities related to housing, access to services and livelihood options. To gain a detailed understanding of people's experiences of grievances, informal conversations and participant observation were crucial. Fieldwork required social sensitivity when navigating multiple power hierarchies, as displacement is a politically volatile

topic in Mexico and it was difficult to gain the trust of residents with traumatic experiences of disasters and suspicions of links between our research and government policies.

The first author also conducted 35 interviews with federal, state and municipal-level government officials, private consultants and civil society representatives on flood governance, urban planning and resettlement policies. In addition, our research team administered a survey to 300 households in three socially differentiated neighbourhoods to gain an understanding of the living conditions in different parts of the city. These data were complemented by qualitative content analysis of policy reports, documents of territorial ordering and urban-development plans. Analysis of archival data and media reports helped to contextualise displacement discourses that emerged during ethnographic inquiry.

The second author carried out fieldwork in western Oromia from February through August 2009, in an area where various resettlement schemes had been undertaken by consecutive Ethiopian regimes. Empirical data were collected through 68 thematic interviews and a survey of 630 households, including 387 resettlers and 243 hosts. The survey was carried out in eight resettlement sites, namely, Kenaf, Jirma, Dhidhessa, Lugama, Baqo, Cawaqa, Machara and Tulama. The interviews, complemented by participant observation and group discussions, were conducted in Angar 1, Angar 2, Balo, Bareda and Shankora, with the aim of exploring the variation in displacement experiences according to social position, gender and political power. Issues addressed in the interviews and questionnaires included the government's promises and decision-making about relocation, access to land, livelihood strategies, social relationships and resettlement experiences. Resettlement policy documents, feasibility studies and implementation reports were analysed as supplementary data sources. Data gathering was developed in a manner that enabled analysis of the processes prior to, during and after relocation. Furthermore, in both Villahermosa and Oromia, the interviews, participant observation and questionnaires were elaborated in a way that enabled cross-checking between different data sources. In Table 1, we summarise the key similarities and differences between the two cases, including those related to the data gathering methods.

The following analysis illustrates the role of the state and institutional governance in multiple marginalisations in both study areas, and the ways that the displaced residents struggle to cope with the prevailing forms of governance and related grievances. It also shows how multiple marginalities are subject to different layers of interpretation, depending upon who is trying to make sense of them and for what purposes.

**Table 1.** A summary of similarities and differences between the two study cases.

	Villahermosa, Mexico	Applies to both Villahermosa and Oromia	Oromia, Ethiopia
Type of displacement		Government-sponsored	
General causes of displacement		Environmental Socio-political	
Specific causes of displacement	Flooding City-beautification Real-estate redevelopment		Land shortage Rainfall shortage and drought Conservation enclosures
Location	Urban		Rural
Data sources		Interviews with displaced people Participant observation Questionnaire for survey Interviews with institutional stakeholders Policy documents Media sources Group discussions	
Intersecting variables of analysis		Social position Gender Political power	
Primary issues of contestation		Marginalisation in decision-making Violent displacement Limited access to resources and services Inadequate infrastructure	Ethnicity
Manifestations of marginalisation and injustice		Governmental control and institutional neglect Socially differentiated impacts of relocation	
Forms of resistance and justice claims		Everyday resistance	
	Restricted social mobilisation		Intense social mobilisation

#### 4. The politics of displacement and multiple marginalisations

To understand justice issues related to the institutional politics of displacement, it is necessary to consider how material and discursive forms of governance shape institutional decision-making and everyday politics surrounding displacements. In this section, we pay special attention to the questions of who decides for whom, and who lives with the consequences.

In both cases analysed here, environmental and socio-political reasons for displacement are tightly intertwined. Examining the 2007 flood in Villahermosa from a political-ecological perspective makes it clear that the natural causes of flooding cannot be separated from wider socio-political processes. In October 2007, a tropical storm provoked heavy rainfall in the area. However, the operators of the upriver Peñitas Dam did not open the reservoir spillways until the water had reached 4 m above the maximum level and an emergency was declared. Debate in the media and public discussion suggested that the disaster was caused because the electricity companies had prioritised their profits (Rinne and Nygren 2016). Furthermore, displacements of informal residents from the centre relate to segregated urban policy and class-related distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. While marginal residents have been forcefully relocated from risk-prone areas, affluent neighbourhoods have been built in critical risk areas by constructing massive flood-prevention infrastructure, including landfills, dykes and water-pumping stations.

Concerning the causes of displacement in Oromia, government documents and interviewed officials attributed land shortage and land degradation to overpopulation, implicating them as problems of people's own making, whereas rainfall shortage and drought were portrayed as natural phenomena associated with global climate change. According to their narrative, overpopulation leads to less land per capita which, through deforestation, cultivation of marginal lands and land degradation, produces livelihood insecurity. While ignoring the role of governmental politics in these environmental-social problems, the state positioned itself as a source of the solution (FDRE 2003, 2004, 2010). The relationship between population growth and land availability is complicated in Ethiopia, where over 80% of the population are small-holders who depend on land for their livelihoods. Nevertheless, the state, which holds almost absolute control over land, is simultaneously making available millions of hectares for lease to international investors (Kelly and Peluso 2015). To legitimise these procedures, the state depoliticises both land-leasing and resettlement policies by rendering them exclusively technical (Li 2014). The institutional portrayal of the causes of displacement as apolitical conceals their intertwined environmental-political nature, while limiting the questions of justice to the technical realm, in which the state pretends to play a neutral or benign role. Government authorities repeatedly denied that acts of evicting people from their farmlands for conservation and land-reclamation purposes were political.

The institutional justifications of displacement and expropriation were in both cases based on ignoring informal residents' usufruct land rights and backed by



humiliating discourses that presented them as unruly trespassers. In both Villahermosa and Oromia, displacements were executed as joint operations between different levels of government, with visions of how the territories and residents in question were to be made more governable. In Villahermosa, federal, state and municipal-level governments renewed their plans for flood prevention in 2008. The policy documents emphasised that the 2007 disaster was caused by extreme hydro-meteorological conditions, which would worsen in the future due to global climate change, and thus it was obligatory to remove informal residents from flood-prone areas. In interviews, officials portrayed these residents as illegal encroachers inflicting hazards on the entire city, justifying the expropriation of their living areas in the name of environmental safety. Residents unwilling to leave were forcibly removed, and the authorities mandated to bulldoze their houses to prevent return. The Agreement of Expropriation (Acuerdo 2009, 30–31) related to the colony of Casa Blanca presented dozens of legal grounds for eviction, making relocation seem inevitable and beneficial for the poor, while watering down their rights to oppose it:

...given the immediacy with which competent authorities should act to prevent serious inundations that bring public catastrophes, injuring the health and personal integrity of the Tabascan population, on the basis of the articles 5, sections V and VI...of the Law of State Expropriation, an area...containing three planned areas, **is expropriable and shall be expropriated in provisional manner**, for the reason of public utility...therefore there is an order of immediate occupation of the properties located within the referred planned areas, and as a consequence, those affected are conceded the time-limit of **FIFTEEN CALENDAR DAYS**...to vacate...those not vacating, will be evicted with the help of public forces. (Translated from Spanish, emphasis in the original text.)

These statements ignored the fact that several politicians had persuaded people to settle in these areas to garner their votes. On the contrary, high-level government authorities argued in the media that flood disasters in Villahermosa are severe because of associations between poverty and fraud (*Tabasco Hoy*, 22.09.2010), claiming that building shacks in risk zones promotes a culture of damage beneficiaries, enticing the poor to settle and subsequently demand compensation (*Tabasco Hoy*, 26.07.2010).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, relocations were federal-planned schemes that regional states were supposed to implement, mainly through the state-level food security coordination offices (FDRE 2004). The discrepancies between high-level directives and implementations provoked numerous grievances, especially with regard to the promises given to resettlers and hosts and their lived realities. According to official

presentations, the landscapes of the intended destinations were all appealing; TV shows were used in some districts to inculcate prospects of prosperity. The government also promised goods including two hectares of arable land, a house plot, a pair of oxen and a cow per household, furniture, farm tools, the possibility of returning if not satisfied with the new settlement, and food aid until people could produce enough for themselves. In most cases these promises were not kept, and it was a shock when many displaced found themselves relocated in highly degraded areas. Meanwhile, the hosts were promised that their livelihoods would not be negatively affected, yet most lost a significant part of their farmland and grazing to the government's scheme, while their access to services was highly compromised (Wayessa and Nygren 2016).

In both areas, a nuanced analysis of the politics behind the official procedures revealed a process of differentiated displacements intersecting with class, gender and political power. In Villahermosa, concerning the formulation of criteria for eligibility to receive housing in a relocation site, thousands of impoverished residents – mostly renters or usufruct owners of precarious houses along the riverbanks – were sent to emergency shelters as a contingency measure, where they lived for more than a year before being resettled in a newly built, peri-urban area called Gracias México (Thanks Mexico). Officials paternalistically recalled that this name was chosen because the impoverished beneficiaries should be grateful to the Mexican government for their decent housing. People who could not bear the suffocating conditions of the overcrowded emergency shelters and left prior to the materialisation of the operation were denied any further opportunity to claim houses in the resettlement site.

When this phase was completed, thousands of residents inhabiting flood risk areas near the city-centre were relocated to the colonies of 27 de Octubre and Bicentenario near Gracias México. Some of the emergency shelter residents who had lost their shacks in the flood evidently benefitted from more secure housing. However, not all displaced people were rehoused; the resettlement rules were based on strict social rankings, according to which compensation was provided only to those able to provide official documentation of long-term, 'peaceful' residence in the area, while those classified as squatters were denied any right to claim for relocation. As these projects largely replaced other public housing schemes, they advanced differentiated displacements with unequalising effects.

Furthermore, there was another link through which displacements intersected with class and socially segregated urban policy. Beyond the authorities' official statements that relocations were necessary for environmental safety, there were less public aims to

beautify the centre and make it socially more attractive by eradicating informal settlements. This agenda was strongly supported by affluent and middle-class residents resistant to spending public revenues on providing flood-prevention infrastructure to 'encroachers'. As Doshi (2013, 849–950) notes of Mumbai, resettlement projects were presented as win–win solutions, offering formalised housing for the legitimate poor, land tax revenues for the state, landscape beautification for the upper classes and redevelopment opportunities for construction companies. Soon after the expropriation, not-so-public plans emerged for real estate redevelopment in the area, linking the displacements to prospective land speculation and accumulation by dispossession, a coupling compounded by essentialist institutional discourses that separated 'proper citizens' with rights to the city from those conceived of as 'illegal invaders' to be relocated at the edge of the city and at the margins of institutional attendance.

In Oromia, the regional-level guidelines presented resettlers as *gootota misoomaa* ('patriots of development') in an attempt to promote resettlement not so much as an emergency response, but rather as a forward-looking, development-oriented, state-sponsored endeavour producing food security and livelihood improvement (FDRE 2003). The government's self-profiling as a development protagonist began around the same time it was advancing authoritarian governance and narrowing the space for democratic decision-making. However, rather than exhibiting improvement and progress, the resettlers' farewells were uncertain and hopeless; it was a sharp contrast to the optimistic aspirations they had when informed about relocation to areas with abundant land and adequate rainfall. Jamila, a 37-year-old mother of nine children resettled in Machara, who belonged to the first group of resettlers, recalled the removal as a highly risky undertaking. According to Jamila: 'People cried, fearing that we might vanish. We had never moved from our home prior to that'. Their relatives and friends sent them off in tears in what appeared to be a final goodbye.

In both cases analysed here, officials portrayed resettlement sites as devoid of people and free from conflict, paying scant attention to host populations' anxiety about massive resettlement near their living-areas. Furthermore, in both cases, the displaced were promised improved living conditions, yet resettled in low-value fringes, far from their previous homes and sources of subsistence. In Oromia, Abdi, a young resettler in Kenaf, who had been waiting 5 years for the government response to his land-allocation application, noted:

We were told about fertile land, where we could produce crops abundantly without using fertilizers...

about water abundantly flowing all over the place, where one may easily divert water for irrigation... When we came here, that wasn't true... There is nobody among us with access to irrigation. (Interview by second author, 29 June 2009)

Although there was an official discourse of environmental improvement and mitigation of marginality, the displacements were conducted in both cases in ways that advanced social distinction. Furthermore, social position and gender were intersected in the ways that reinforced people's experiences of marginalisation. In Villahermosa, the government promised to ratify housing treaties in the names of the women due to women's vulnerable position in relation to house ownership. This strategy was based on the government's official commitment to enhancing gender equality. However, through discursive framings that stressed the women's social-reproductive roles, resettlement policies set aside women's other needs.<sup>3</sup> Several officials argued that, as caretakers of children and domestic well-being, women wanted to exchange their precarious illegality for formalised living and, indeed, many welcomed the new housing and associated amenities. Yet the gender-related disadvantages of resettlement were concealed. In the interviews, many women emphasised the physical and economic strain of commuting to the centre for domestic work or informal trading, while for those unable to commute, lack of employment opportunities had reduced household incomes. The essentialist framing of marginal women's subjectivity in social-reproductive roles ignored those working outside the home. By rendering the gendered aspects of living and livelihoods to technical issues of formal compliance, officials misrecognised women's crucial role in the financial maintenance of family, categorising them as surplus population involved in the unprofitable trade of fancy goods.

Furthermore, there were several intersections between social position and political power in the differentiated displacements. In analysing the hidden arenas of institutional politics, it became clear that, when implementing resettlements, officials used tactics of manipulation, humiliation and symbolic violence, meanwhile constructing strict categorisations of who deserved recognition in decision-making. Many practices sought to demonstrate the power of the state to set the rules and mark its authority over people and landscapes. As a high-ranking official in a governmental institute involved in resettlement operations in Villahermosa argued:

If somebody does not live according to the requisites, we order a juridical measure to terminate the contract. Because the State has supremacy in these issues. So, for legal requisites, the house is then handed over to another person. (Interview by first author, 14 April 2014)

In Oromia, the state likewise set the rules with scant attention to people's needs and aspirations. According to our interview data, the government organised pre-relocation visits to potential resettlement sites in a far from transparent manner and without including women. The exclusion of the host communities was also evident as visitors did not have any formal contact with them. Moreover, visitors were taken only to appealing sites, reinforcing the governmental campaign that relocation areas were evergreen. This was partly why most resettlers represented the difference between the promises given and the reality they faced as *dachee fi samii* ('sky and earth').

Both cases demonstrate that institutional governance of displacements produced multiple marginalisations and injustices linked to social position, gender and political power. As we show in the next section, uneven forms of political representation and discourses of recognition shaped the evictees' political subjectivities, mediating their opportunities to claim justice. The undertakings transferred already vulnerable people to marginalised locations at the edge of state responsibility, while increasing social segregation and facilitating prospects for land speculation in areas of displacement that were classified as risk zones in official documents, while being evaluated as strategic areas for investment and redevelopment in a more hidden agenda.

## 5. Grievances, political subjectivity and claims for justice

In the following, we examine people's experiences of displacement-related injustices, and how institutional governance shaped political subjectivity and claims for justice among the displaced. We link political ecology analysis with that of intersectionality to capture the struggles over material resources and cultural meanings. In both cases, people's experience of governance was a mixture of institutional intrusion and absence. Through tight control, government authorities sought to subject the marginal residents to strict surveillance; at the same time, people in both Villahermosa and Oromia claimed that the state had abandoned them, showing considerable mistrust of public institutions.

The displacements effected huge transformations in people's lives and livelihoods. In Villahermosa, people recalled their feelings of humiliation when the authorities gave the eviction order and there was no other choice but to accept removal; the destruction of their homes was a traumatic betrayal for those who had already suffered from flood disaster and loss of their belongings. In the resettlement sites, the densely packed houses were laid in monotonous lines, with roofs that leaked when it rained. The rupture of social ties provoked feelings of dislocation, entwined with

fear for livelihoods, as the authorities forbade people to raise chickens, cultivate corn or establish mini-markets for informal trading. There was a total prohibition against informal business in the resettlement sites, based on the authorities' vehement commitment to extirpating informal ways of earning a living, inhabiting and appropriating the city.

While policy documents announced that the government had improved marginalised women's legal rights to housing by signing the housing contracts in women's names, political practices were incommensurate with residents' conceptions of justice. An increased fear of home loss was reported, especially among those women who commuted for work. Sonia, a single mother from Gracias México, explained that administrators implementing the projects reconfigured the rules in a way that caused huge anxiety among the 'beneficiaries':

After coming here, I first worked as a barber, then in a shoe shop, but I had to withdraw...because they would take away our homes. The administrator says that if you aren't in your house...they will clear the house and give it to another person...*(Sonia begins to cry)*. But if I don't work, my children will not eat. Those who don't work have to search for bones to make a soup for their children...They [the administrators] ask us: Do you have any title of property? Nobody has. So, they claim that these are borrowed houses, that we don't have any rights. (Interview by first author, 5 April 2013)

Correspondingly, in Oromia, both resettlers and hosts felt that the government subjected ethnically marginalised smallholders to its will, with little concern for their feelings of social dislocation and experiences of injustice with regard to resource access. According to Musa, a resettler in Balo, 15 children died of malnourishment during the early stage of relocation, which is an epitome of neglect by the state that sponsored the scheme. Furthermore, the resettlements provoked many conflicts between resettlers and hosts. In Tulama, one such clash resulted in numerous wounded and the destruction of 45 houses. According to Tolasa, a host-community member, officials had promised that the resettlement sites would be located a 5-hour walk from the host community; however, the promises were not kept and the hosts lost part of their lands. In both Mexico and Ethiopia cases, people felt increasingly marginalised from access to resources, services and forums of political representation, a situation that rendered them mere onlookers in decisions that strongly affected their lives and livelihoods.

While institutional control over people's lives and livelihoods was strong, the presence of public authorities was meagre in resettlement sites in both study areas. Frustration was a recurrent theme in the interviews, as people claimed that they had not been genuinely consulted about the relocations. In

Villahermosa, people recalled the much greater space and large patios of their earlier homes, while the houses at resettlement sites were dark huts with poor ventilation and intermittent shortages in water and electricity. The state's inability or unwillingness to provide the sites with adequate health care, education and security services was accompanied by exceptionally high rates of violence. Police were reluctant to patrol these colonies considered as hotbeds of crime, and in terms of public security, they were some of the most underserved areas within the city. These feelings of abandonment were enforced by institutional misrecognition that invoked humiliating discourses about who had the right to which spaces in the city.

In Oromia, people's experiences of injustice began with the practices of resettler 'voluntarism' and host 'consultation'. Although the government insisted that relocations were based on informed consent, what actually happened was that people were ordered to stop cultivating their former lands and then told, 'If you are willing, there is land to which we can take you'. Some of those who refused ended up on a smaller plot than previously or became landless labourers. People were threatened by officials who told them, among other forms of coercion, to leave their lands or face imprisonment (Hammond 2011, 427). Evaluations of government treatment were anchored in feelings of being classified as 'second-class citizens' or 'non-citizens', as Yusuf, a resettler in Tulama, explained it.

The government also used host consultation as an instrument to legitimise resettlements; yet, according to our interviews, such consultations included persuading the hosts to accept the operations, rather than engaging them as partners in decision-making. Those who raised critical questions and attempted to resist were arrested and later released with strong warnings not to engage in further dissent. In addition to traumatic experiences of coercion, host interviewees expressed feelings of unequal treatment vis-à-vis resettlers. Of particular relevance were provisions of agricultural input and food aid, which the government mainly distributed to resettlers. Many host-community members sadly raised the question: 'Why aren't we treated equally when we fail to support ourselves?'

Amid traumatic experiences of injustice, residents in both study areas struggled to reconfigure the meanings of living in marginalised conditions and coping with uncertainty and improvised improvements. In Villahermosa, residents amplified their patios and established mini-stores, butcheries and dressmaker's shops, first as hidden stalls, and later as more public workshops. Many residents also refused to pay for the intermittent water services, connecting their pipes informally to official networks. In Oromia, some resettlers returned to their former settlements; these included *gugataa*, resettlers who fled

immediately upon arrival, and *hubataa*, who left after a couple of months.<sup>4</sup> Others clandestinely moved to other resettlement sites they considered more promising. Where situations allowed, people organised themselves into cooperatives, with names indicating the desire for a brighter future, such as *Maabara Farra-lyyuummaa* (Anti-poverty Cooperative) and *Kufa-Kaas* (Raiser of the Fallen).

Considerable academic and public attention has focused on the strategies employed by organised justice movements to confront the environmental grievances affecting them. However, to fully understand the heterogeneity of claims for justice, it is also important to pay attention to more fragmented struggles and scattered demands (Borras and Franco 2013). Our study revealed that periods of mobilisation and periods of quiescence often alternate in the search for justice. In Villahermosa, due to the fact that the region is one of the most important areas for oil extraction in Mexico, the government terminated the roadblocks and demonstrations of displaced people by force and political persuasion. These operations obliged people to cope with violent displacements through everyday forms of resistance and through clientelistic relations that required extended waiting to see whether promises were fulfilled. Interestingly, gender issues also shaped opportunities to search for justice. As the authorities conceptualised women as non-confrontational family caretakers, it was more difficult for them to suppress protests involving female participants and children.

In Oromia, multiple grievances, associated with differentiated displacements and authoritarian forms of governance, have recently led to a movement called the Oromo Protest (#OromoProtests), with connections to broader social movements. These struggles involved various non-violent means, including delivering emotionally charged speeches on displacements and land investments as violations of people's rights to resources and livelihoods, invoking historical and contemporary injustices against the ethnic Oromo. After enormous suffering, these efforts succeeded in mobilising people from diverse groups for a broad-based movement that forced the government to revise some of its development plans. The protestors have reiterated their demand for justice and mounted vigorous resistance against intersectional oppression by the government that dispossesses the poor and denies people's right to choose the model of development they consider just.

In both cases, people's experiences of injustice are linked to the unacceptable consequences of displacement, with many asking for a more responsible state, fairer compensation for lost resources and jobs, transparent access to services and inclusive forms of governance that would allow residents a greater say in the processes that affect them. The displaced are



demanding a state that is less allied to elite interests and more oriented towards equal citizenship rights. Although there are differences in the extent to which residents are able to use direct action and build wider networks, in both cases the main goals are more inclusive governance and fair distribution of benefits and burdens, despite the state's attempt to silence the claims for justice through the institutional politics of intersectional oppression.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has examined the institutional politics of state-induced displacements and related experiences of environmental injustice through analysis of flood disasters and urban displacements in the city of Villahermosa, Mexico, and government-sponsored displacements and resettlements in rural communities of Oromia, Ethiopia. Our study has shown the fundamental role of the state and institutional governance in producing multiple marginalisations and controlling residents' efforts to question such interventions.

In our view, a combination of political–ecological and intersectional approaches provides more detailed understanding of displacement-related marginalisations and cognate grievances, especially in the global South. Such a combination of approaches can advance the analytical rigour of environmental-justice research and provide more nuanced understanding of the interlinkages between various dimensions of justice. Through a political–ecological perspective, our study demonstrated the wider linkages between institutional governance, the politics of marginalisation and experiences of injustice. The integration of an intersectional approach with that of political ecology allowed a detailed analysis of how multiple marginalisations worked simultaneously, and how institutional governance affected residents differently, based on intersections between class, gender and political power in Villahermosa, and between class, gender, ethnicity and political power in Oromia. The intersectional approach also enabled us to understand how institutional power relationships shaped the political subjectivity of the displaced.

The two-sided forms of institutional governance – strict surveillance and control interlinked with institutional intrusion and neglect – provoked many kinds of grievances among the displaced. In addition to evicting the most marginalised residents from strategic places planned for redevelopment, displacements produced injustices differentiated by class, gender and political power. In Villahermosa, the institutional focus on women's reproductive roles and domesticity ignored those who needed to work outside the home. In Oromia, the operations' impacts on resettlers' and hosts' access to land and livelihood opportunities

intersected with social position and political power, while women were strongly marginalised in relocation decision-making and many children lost their lives due to broken promises of food aid.

The hierarchical politics of displacements, and the categorical representations of the displaced as unruly trespassers, shaped people's political subjectivity and opportunities to search for justice. In both cases, residents contested authoritarian forms of governance with symbolic reinterpretation, everyday resistance and organised mobilisation. In Villahermosa, efforts to challenge unjust policies and claim more inclusive governance largely took place through everyday forms of resistance; in Oromia, more open confrontations rotated with hidden forms of counter-action. Authoritarian power relationships and the politics of control and neglect, however, left few opportunities for people to get their claims recognised in the government-controlled forums of political representation. Further research is needed on the multifaceted interlinkages between the institutional governance and (in)justice of displacements, and associated redevelopments through dispossession, ongoing both in urban and rural areas in diverse circumstances in the global South.

## Notes

1. In Mexico, the federal-level National Water Commission (CONAGUA) and the Ministry of Governance (SEGOB), as well as the state-level Institute of Civil Protection and the Institute of Housing in Tabasco had the main responsibility in planning and implementing relocations. In Ethiopia, regional resettlement operations were formulated within guidelines prepared by the federal government, while the Oromia Food Security Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission was responsible for the coordination of resettlement, with numerous institutions involved in implementing the resettlement schemes (FDRE 2004, 2).
2. Resettlers from eastern Oromia were predominantly Muslims, whereas those from central Oromia were Orthodox Christians, and the hosts were mostly Protestant/Lutheran Christians. Our analysis did not find religious differences between resettlers and hosts significant in explaining people's experiences of injustices.
3. For corresponding principles in relocation policies in Mumbai, India, see Doshi (2013).
4. According to the Voice of America, *Afaan Oromoo* Programme on 11 May 2017, from those relocated in Ilu Abba-bora, 2408 people were travelling on foot to the capital city to appeal to high-level government authorities. One of the displaced persons referred to himself and his fellow travellers as 'second-class citizens' similar to our interviewees. The resettlers, originally from West Hararge and East Hararge, appealed to the government for a liveable and productive land instead of a waterlogged one they were allocated after 7 years of waiting. This travel is a good signifier of people's continuous quest for justice (<https://www.voaafricanoromoo.com/a/namoonni-lafa-qonnaa-dhaba-nii-gara-jimmaa-godaanan/3847964.html>).



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